SERMONS FOR
Advent and Christmas 2018

An offering of Sermons That Work
Dear Reader,

Thank you for downloading Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2018, a collection of materials prepared by some of the best preachers from across the Episcopal Church.

Sermons That Work, a ministry of the Episcopal Church’s Office of Communication, has provided free and high-quality sermons, Bible studies, and bulletin inserts since 1995. Every week, it is our pleasure to source, review, and publish these pieces; we hope they are edifying as you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these and their corresponding scriptures.

In reviewing more than 20 years of our sermons, I have found that every year—sometimes multiple times each year—our writers have made reference to the pressing need to bravely confront the contemporaneous challenges confronting the Church. Perhaps it shows a longing for simplicity and closeness in a world that seems to get smaller and more dangerous by the day. Perhaps it shows a desire to make no peace with sin. And perhaps it says something about the profound anxiety — that deep, abiding anxiety — that seems to permeate every facet of our modern lives.

In confronting that anxiety and danger, I have found some of the simplest messages to be the most important. I would invite you to read with some intentionality O Little Town of Bethlehem, that classic Christmas hymn penned by Phillips Brooks. Hear it with new ears (to the Forest Green tune, naturally), and be reminded that even in darkness, solitude, sleepiness, and smallness, Jesus Christ, the everlasting Light, steps in and changes everything.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

On behalf of Sermons That Work and the Episcopal Church’s Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Advent and a merry Christmas. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

Your brother in Christ,
Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church
First Sunday of Advent

COLLECT
Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS
JEREMIAH 33:14-16; PSALM 25:1-9; 1 THESSALONIANS 3:9-13; LUKE 21:25-36

WE NEED A LITTLE HOPEFULNESS
by the Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates

On May 24, 1966, a new musical opened on Broadway. Music and lyrics by Jerry Herman, starring Angela Lansbury and Bea Arthur.

It’s the story of the madcap life of eccentric Mame Dennis and how her bohemian, intellectual, arty clique is disrupted when her deceased brother’s 10-year-old son Patrick is entrusted to her care. Rather than bow to convention, Mame introduces the boy to her free-wheeling lifestyle, instilling in him her favorite credo, “Life is a banquet, and most [people] are starving to death.”

At one point in the course of the play, Mame and her new ward are feeling sad. Patrick is mourning the death of his father, and Mame her brother, after all.

She decides to make happy, leading into the song We Need a Little Christmas. In the midst of the song, Patrick protests, “But, Auntie Mame, it’s one week past Thanksgiving Day now,” as if to say it is too early to decorate or celebrate Christmas.

That was 1966, when one week past Thanksgiving was too early for Christmas.

Fast forward to 2018, barely fifty years later. In August, one could encounter Christmas decorations and trees in the local home improvement store. And by November 15th, the Singapore Airport was adorned with “Merry Christmas” banners and the PA system was blaring Frosty, the Snowman. (And that in a country where they recognize four official languages, and the Christians—who are mostly ethnically Chinese—represent less than a third of the population.)

In most of these United States, the stores have unleashed a frenzy of sales events, special promotions, and cheery ads featuring Santa and his reindeer.

The Hallmark Channel is advertising its Countdown to Christmas movie fest, which began on November 1st.

And now there are folks insisting that the twelve days of Christmas begin on December 14 –so they can end on Christmas Day. Traditionally, of course, the first day of Christmas is December 25, and at the end of the twelve days, we have the feast of the Epiphany, on January 6.

And all of this is not about the birth of a Savior, it’s about spending, spending, spending. And spending a lot.

Remember the song I’ll Be Home for Christmas? It’s a Bing Crosby song from 1943. It speaks of “presents on the tree.” These were just little and usually handmade trinkets. Not presents under the tree, huge stacks and piles of purchased merchandise—but simple little gifts that could be hung on the tree’s branches.

And in the midst of all this, the church offers the season of Advent, which is definitely not about shopping for presents. As we heard in today’s gospel story, “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”
This is a prophecy of the end of times, a.k.a. the apocalypse, the Omega, Armageddon, Parousia, the End Times, the promised return of Jesus to judge both the living and the dead. It makes you feel a bit Scrooge-like, doesn’t it?

But perhaps you too have this odd, peculiar hope. Because we need a little hopefulness:

• Hope that the severity of our political rhetoric is precisely what we need to come out of our illusionary comfort zones into a dangerous world and stand up for what is right and good and just.

• Hope that we can rest in an unshakeable belief that we will be cared for in this life, that we will persevere in adversity, and that we will move on to life eternal.

• Hope that we will be freed from our fear and become bright beacons to the brokenhearted, even as we too face the storm, knowing that God has our back.

But, wait a minute. What about this Christ returning in glorious majesty thing? What about last judgment? When we proclaim, “He will come again in glory to judge,” should that not make us quake in our boots? So—should we not be afraid that God will punish us?

Because, we need a little hopefulness, but, let’s face it, we are perfectly content to demand revenge when we get hurt, to live fat and happy surrounded by poverty, and to pick fights whenever we are confronted.

We are not sinister in this, just oblivious. We see only our own materialistic, xenophobic, retaliatory image. Not the image of God, who is quite different from the powers of empire and imperialism:

• This Jesus we follow was born as a homeless traveler, whose family struggled to find welcome.

• This Jesus we follow lived and ministered in poverty, at the mercy of the generosity of others.

• This Jesus we follow offered no exceptions to his table of hospitality.

• This Jesus we follow held more power than anyone on the planet—before or since—yet never once used the force of that power in the face of oppression, or violence, or even his own torture and execution.

Jesus showed an unquenchable, confident optimism—even in seemingly dire situations. And he commanded us not to fear, but live in hope.

And we need a little hopefulness.

• Because horrors run non-stop through our news feeds, fanning our fear.

• Because merchandise is offered to make us feel better, but really only increases that fear.

• Because we fill up our lives with mostly meaningless activities, because it somehow is less frightening to keep busy.

In the relentless pursuit of acquisitions and wealth and power, we risk becoming spiritually disoriented, losing sight of anything sure and steady.

And then faith leaks out bit by bit, more and more fear seeps in, and we start sinking.

Once fear becomes the dominant force in our religion and our lives, we end up even more terrified, more desperate, more jittery. So we seek more and more stuff, we fill up more of our time with entertainment and events, and we grow more hostile to others, more contemptible of those who are different, more drawn to self-protection, mimetic violence, and even aggression.

In other words: we become less and less like Jesus. So we seriously need a little hopefulness.

The very heart of Christianity is inclusion and welcome and invitation. It is trust and contentment and hope that cannot be overtaken. It is serving and yielding and sacrificing.

It is not a scared narcissism that vilifies the other, relentlessly
accumulates material goods and wealth, and seeks power or prestige. And we can and will live in hope, not fear. Because you see, Jesus will come in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Adolph Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, every tyrant that ever was will one day stand before the judgment seat. So we need not fret about judging them—or anyone else.

Now, there’s a little hopefulness: the Last Judgment will put things right.

And, remember: we will stand before the judgment seat, as well.

Christ the King will know everything we’ve done or left undone. Everyone we’ve hurt. Every evil intent, every neglectful moment, every time we gave in to fear.

And he will say, “I forgive you. Welcome into paradise.”

Now, that’s more than a little hopefulness: that’s comfort, reassurance, glad tidings of great joy. “I forgive you. Welcome into paradise.”

So let us not be afraid. Let us prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior. Let us strive to emulate Jesus.

• Jesus, who offers not fear but forgiveness.
• Jesus, who offers not hate but sacrificial love.
• Jesus, who offers not condemnation but life eternal.

What would this world be like if we, each of us, lived more and more into that sure and certain hope?

_Father Barrie Bates_ lives in Jersey City and Michigan. He wishes to draw your attention to the Advent Project (theadventproject.org), which calls for a seven-week season of Advent, something the Revised Common Lectionary already supports. By this means, preachers will have the opportunity to speak of the Advent season and Christmas before the major Thanksgiving shopping rush. It’s worth considering.

---

**Second Sunday of Advent**

**COLLECT**

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and for sake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**READINGS**

_BARUCH 5:1-9 OR MALACHI 3:1-4; CANTICLE 4 OR 16;
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11; LUKE 3:1-6_

**WHO NEEDS A PROPHET?**

by the Rev. Deon Johnson

_In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”_

Who needs a prophet anyway? Prophets have an annoying habit of pointing out our flaws, airing family secrets, and being all around nuisances. They love to call us out when we stray from God and when we have lost sight of truth. At best, they are a nuisance; at worst, they are meddling. Who needs these messengers of discomfort and sacrifice? What are they good for? Wouldn’t it be best for them to get on their soap boxes and protest and preach and prognosticate somewhere, anywhere else but here?
It is hard enough trying to be a good upright, churchgoing, tithe-giving, Sunday school-teaching person without one of these annoying prophets calling us to care for the poor, to look out for the downtrodden, to seek after justice and righteousness. Don’t we do enough already?

It would be nice if they would go bother the people in power, the people who can actually do something for the poor and the needy. Why do these prophets insist on bothering good people? But here they are, calling us once again to repentance, and forgiveness, and hope. You would think that they were broken records, spinning the same thing over and over and over again.

Here comes another one called John, son of Zechariah—John the Baptist, some call him. He’s no ordinary prophet; he doesn’t just preach that we need to repent, but he has the nerve to insist that people get baptized in the muddy River Jordan no less. It would be nice if John sang a different tune for a change. He is always running around, “Repent this! Prepare that!” Haven’t we heard this message before? And yet he persists. Like crazy old Isaiah preaching about paths being made straight, and valleys and mountains being filled and made flat. The thing about straightening crooked places and valleys being filled and mountains being brought low is that we like our paths crooked, our valleys deep, and our mountains high. We like things the way they are and the way they have always been.

Who needs a prophet anyway?

We need prophets. The people who sit in darkness, in deep despair, they need prophets. The people who look around and see destruction and desolation, they need prophets. The people who have no voice, no rights, no hope—they need prophets, because prophets proclaim a new and better way. Prophets are truth-tellers to a world longing and praying and looking for glimpses of hope.

Our world needs prophets. Prophets are harbingers of hope and hope is found in the one whose coming we await. The message foretold by John breaks into our world with deafening silence and shatters the dark of despair with the light of love.

Who needs prophets? We need prophets. We need those annoying, nagging nuisances that call us to be better followers of Jesus. As Rachel Held Evans reminds us, “Biblically speaking, a prophet isn’t a fortune-teller or soothsayer who predicts the future, but rather a truth-teller who sees things as they really are—past, present, and future—and who challenges their community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.”

We need the voice of one crying out in the wilderness because things happen in the wilderness. In the wilderness, the needs are raw and real, and sweet words and hollow sentiment are not enough. We need prophets especially when we have grown so full of ourselves that we neglect to see the orphan, the refugee, the migrant, the widow, and the stranger. We need prophets to call us back to God, back to a place where hope is found not only in church, but in the world around us—in the interaction of strangers, the joys of difference, and in the radicalness of love.

Like Jesus and John, we are tasked with holding lightly to the things that do not matter, in order to be open to a hope-filled future to which God calls us. Now more than ever, our communities, our nation, and our world are in desperate need of the glimmer of hope found in Jesus Christ. Now more than ever, we need to not only hear the cries of the prophets, but to take on the mantle of the prophets.

We, as the church, the people of God, the followers of Jesus, are called to claim our prophetic birthright and be the voice of the voiceless, the hope of the hopeless, the love of the loveless.

Often in the church, we can feel small and powerless, wondering how we will survive, being concerned about ourselves rather than those in need. But God’s prophetic grace often falls not on the powerful or the mighty, but on extraordinarily ordinary people who turn the world right-side-up. We are called to remember that we are not a group of people who believe all the same things; we are a group of people caught up in God’s plan of redemption and salvation with Jesus in the center.

The question facing us as Christians, who seek to follow where Jesus leads and to heed the call of John, isn’t “Do we need prophets?” The
The question we must answer is “Are we willing to be prophets?” Are we willing to let God’s light shine through us so much so that we can show the world a new and better way? Are we willing to be prophetic enough to walk out in faith and break bread with people who may not look like us, or talk like us, or vote like us or speak like us? Because that is the Good News that we have to share; that is the prophetic vision that has the power to transform our world.

There are prophets in our midst. There is one sitting next to you right now. Look around. Listen. Keep awake. There is still darkness and despair and shattered dreams. There are still sins to be forgiven and enemies to turn into friends. It may not look like it, it may not sound like it, it may not feel like it, but in Jesus Christ, love has already won. The light of love and the glimmer of hope has broken through the gloom. The crooked places have been made straight, the valleys and mountains made smooth, the rough places made plain. Look and you will see the salvation of our God breaking through in a thousand pinpricks of light.

So, tune your ears to the voices crying from the wilderness, pay attention to the weirdos who speak of Good News and forgiveness and repentance and hope. Be the prophet who points to Jesus coming once more into our world. Amen.

The Rev. Deon Johnson serves as Rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Brighton, Mich. A liturgical consultant, Deon specializes in helping communities revision their worship spaces to better reflect both their needs and the theology of welcome found in the Eucharist. In his spare time, Deon enjoys working on websites and is an avid photographer.

Third Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; CANTICLE 9; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7; LUKE 3:7-18

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

by the Rev. Canon Dr. Ada Wong Nagata

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, traditionally called Gaudete - or Rejoice - Sunday. It comes from today’s lesson from the Letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

In the other two lessons, the prophet Zephaniah also calls for shouts of joy: “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” It is because the King of Israel is in her midst. The prophet Isaiah also tells people to rejoice and sing the praises of the Lord, “for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.”

Advent is a season of waiting, expectation, and preparation for the coming of the Lord. We know that Jesus the Christ will be born very soon. We certainly need to rejoice.

However, in the Gospel reading, there comes the straight-talking prophet, John the Baptist. He is yelling at those who came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers!” It does not sound like he is rejoicing, though. What has caused John to call others vipers?
After this outburst, John continues his theme of repentance. He tells the crowd not to take for granted their status as children of Abraham as a guarantee of salvation. He tells them they need to bear fruits from repentance. He warns them that an ax is waiting by the roots of the tree, should no fruit be borne. It is not who they are or who their ancestor was, it is what they do that is most important.

One might have thought that those who came and were yelled at would turn around and leave. Nevertheless, they did not leave John. John may sound harsh to us, but people probably felt his sincerity, his telling the truth with love, and his concern for the people.

There is a joke that people like to go to Episcopal churches because there is absolution of sins every Sunday. They say that people can do whatever they like and sin during the weekdays and be absolved every Sunday. Is that what confession and absolution are about? Only doing lip service? It is probably these kinds of people that caused John to call them a brood of vipers. In the confession, people say, “We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.”

We are truly sorry and humbly repent. This is a confession from the heart. It is not lip service; it is not just showing up and reciting the Confession of Sin.

These people not only do not leave, but rather they stay and ask John for an alternative: “What then should we do?” — a true wish to repent, to get into action so as to turn from their old ways of life. John the Baptist knows the Messiah is coming soon. He feels the urgency, he wants people to be prepared and to bear fruit. He gives them advice.

John’s advice to the crowd is much easier than Jesus’. John tells people to share what they have—an easier task than when Jesus tells the young man to sell all he owns. John says if they have two coats, share. If they have food, share. In other words, care for others who have less than they do.

Then come the tax collectors. They too ask, “What should we do?” At that time, the tax collectors were mostly Jews hired by the Romans; these collectors were paid a portion of whatever they collected, so they tended to collect more than was required from the people. John tells them to be fair and not to collect more than they should.

Here comes the third group, the soldiers, probably Roman. They ask the same: “What should we do?” This time, John tells them not to exploit people or make false accusations. That is, they should live with integrity and honor.

This passage shows the diversity of the group. The crowd seems to represent the Jews who have enough; the tax collectors, the outcasts; and the soldiers, the gentiles. They all seek to change their lives. Even though John is harsh in the beginning, he gives advice to them all. John’s advice is not dramatic, he just asks them to turn from what they are doing their own way, and instead to start doing things the right way—God’s way.

The people want to change and are waiting for their Messiah to come. With John’s urgent teaching, they suspect him to be that Messiah, but he knows his call is to clear the way for the real one to come. John is to introduce the coming of Jesus, guiding people to see God’s way. He tells the people that the Messiah, the Christ, is coming with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus the Christ will come with the power and great might of God to be among us. The great fire is to cleanse us from our wrongdoings.

John the Baptist is teaching us to care for those in need, to seek justice, and to have integrity. Actually, those are part of what following Jesus the Christ is about. With true repentance to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, rejoice!

John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness, a place where one may get lost, a barren place that seems to have no life or hope. Wilderness is a good metaphor for us right now. We are in a world bombarded by media, especially social media. We are certainly bewildered by news and fake news, truth and alternate truth. There seems to be no peace in the world. Natural disasters seem to be occurring more often than usual. Hope seems to be dwindling in the world.

We Christians need to ask a question: “What should we do?”
We should carry the prophetic voice of John the Baptist, calling out to the brood of vipers for true repentance. We should change our way of life. The gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” is increasing in society; are we willing to share with those with less? Or are we to continue taking more from others who are already struggling to fill their pockets? Are we to continue to benefit ourselves? Are we to elevate our status at the expense of hurting others? Are we to offer false accusations by telling half-truths or even totally lying? Are we willing to call out ourselves and those who do these things?

John the Baptist has given us the direction to be prepared for the coming of Christ. Are we willing to turn around? Are we courageous enough to hear and heed his prophetic voice?

The third Sunday of Advent is also called Stir-Up Sunday because today’s collect says, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us.” May God the Almighty with the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit also stir up our hearts to truly repent and to follow Christ. Amen.

The Rev. Canon Dr. Ada Wong Nagata is priest-in-charge and director of Ah Foo Jubilee Community Center at Church of Our Savior, Manhattan, a bilingual congregation with English and Cantonese in Chinatown, New York. She is a board member of Li Tim-Oi Center, an Asian Ministry Center of the Episcopal Church based in the Diocese of Los Angeles, and honorary canon of the Cathedral Center of St. Paul, Diocese of Los Angeles. Ada earned her Doctor of Ministry from Episcopal Divinity School in 2015. She served as Convener of the Chinese Convocation of Episcopal Asiamerican Ministries (EAM) from 2009-2016. Ada loves hiking and meditative walk.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

MICAH 5:2-5A; CANTICLE 15 (OR 3) OR PSALM 80:1-7; HEBREWS 10:5-10; LUKE 1:39-45, (46-55)

A SONG OF HOPE

by the Rev. Anna Tew

Liturgical seasons are worthwhile because they reflect the rhythm of life itself. Advent reflects seasons of our lives that are filled with hope and anticipation. We often associate these with happy times: waiting for a wedding, waiting for a baby to be born, or waiting for the arrival of a loved one who has been away for a long time.

But the first Christmas wasn’t exactly happy and bright, and the readings of Advent itself aren’t particularly happy, either. Advent speaks of awaiting God’s help in the midst of desperation, reminding us that we can find echoes of Advent as clearly in the homeless shelter as in the maternity ward.

Advent calls to us in the midst of the weight on our shoulders, and it speaks hope. As we watch the news and see the pain in the world, we are faced with our own powerlessness. As snow and ice and cold weigh down the landscape of many northern climes, we too feel weighed down: by our ever-extending holiday to-do lists, by the suffering in the world, and by our own personal struggles.

Advent is here to remind us that we cannot save ourselves, but that there is yet hope.
Today, with four candles lit, the Song of Mary soars through the Gospel reading and into our hearts again, as it does every year.

Mary, the unwed mother, the fiancée of a poor carpenter. Mary, who knows depths of desperation that many of us will never have to know. Mary, who felt herself powerless but sang to God who was about to save the whole world.

We often think of Mary as gentle and meek, but today, Mary is brave and bold, singing loud and strong.

Everything — the very shape of human history — is about to change.

The new dawn is on the way, and Mary sings out to greet it. The weight lessens; hope is born.

In the first installment of the three-part series *The Hunger Games*, there is a scene in the movie that is not in the book, but it well sums up the trilogy’s theme. President Snow, the dictator of the dystopian, futuristic country of Panem, is walking in his rose garden with the chief “game maker,” Seneca Crane. Crane is the man responsible for creating a game that pits young people from the twelve districts of Panem against one another in a highly publicized fight to the death each year. The winner of the Hunger Games is then held up as a brave, strong hero that represents the spirit of Panem.

President Snow asks Seneca Crane why the games must have a winner. If the Capitol simply wanted to show its power and to instill fear and control, he says, why not simply execute people? Why the games? Why a winner?

Seneca Crane does not understand. He stares back, confused.

“Hope,” President Snow says simply. “*Hope* is the only thing stronger than *fear*. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it’s contained.”

A little hope, says Snow, would allow the games to entertain the people and would allow them to have a hero to root for, while also keeping the Capitol firmly in control. A lot of hope would topple Snow’s oppressive regime entirely. The books and movies, as you either know or can probably guess, are about that spark *not* being contained. The second installment of the story is called *Catching Fire* as hope — a lot of hope — is revived in the country of Panem.

Hope is more than mere optimism. A lot of hope can shake the foundations of everything that weighs us down. A lot of hope can change the course of history.

For Mary’s part, she doesn’t initially greet the news of her pregnancy with her soaring song and blazing hope. When Luke’s Gospel first introduces us to Mary, she is more like the traditional image of Mary — young, meek, seemingly timid, but ultimately faithful. When the angel tells her the news, she consents, but she’s not singing yet.

As she’s absorbing the news from the angel Gabriel that she will conceive and bear a child, he tells her, perhaps to console her: Elizabeth, your relative, is pregnant too, even in her old age!

Gabriel doesn’t actually tell Mary to go to Elizabeth, but Luke says she still “made haste” to go to the Judean town in the hill country to see her.

Mary wants to be near someone who understands. Elizabeth is also pregnant by a miracle. Elizabeth, Mary knows, won’t think she’s crazy. And here, with another human being who understands that God works in really weird and unexpected and direct ways, Mary is able to find the courage to sing her song of hope. Not ordinary optimism, but great hope. The kind that catches fire. The kind that sings loud.

Today, Mary sings as she invites us into the vulnerable territory of daring to hope big. Optimism looks behind us to find comfort in what we’ve experienced before. Hope — the big, world-shaking, musical hope of Mary — looks ahead, knowing that we cannot imagine what God is able to do.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with optimism. Optimism hopes for good fortune, for fun with friends and family during the holidays, for a blessed and happy new year, and for love and warmth to surround us. There is nothing wrong with a little optimistic Advent cheer.
But if you have experienced the depths of despair, if you have seen the pain that exists in the world, you know that optimism is not enough on its own. It is too difficult to sustain. The world is too broken, too violent, and too divided, and we alone cannot fix it. Our one spark of hope is that God has spoken and told us that someday, all things — *all things* — from our personal struggles to the weight of the world’s pain, shall be made right. That hope is why Mary sings.

Today, the Gospel story invites us, like Mary, to seek out others in order to find our song of hope. It wasn’t until Mary was with Elizabeth in the Judean hills that her hope burst into song. And maybe, whether we know it or not, that’s what we’ve done today, too. We have made haste to seek one another out, to gather together so that we, too, can sing songs of hope.

Our song is one of extraordinary hope. Hope that has seen the broken and divided state of the world and knows that it cannot afford to hope too small because we cannot repair the world on our own. Only God can, and only God will. In the meantime, we are called to make our corner of the world that God so loves a less divided, more trustworthy, more hopeful place. We are called to sing.

The best part about Mary’s song of hope is that it is never hope unfulfilled. Every year, we remember her bold song to remind ourselves that God has already broken through. Even in the darkness, even in the deepest disappointments, even when we are betrayed, and even when the world looks most broken, we keep this crazy hope alive that God has and God will break through. And today, we make haste to find each other to sing that hope again, to fan that spark into flame again.

The Reverend Joseph Peters-Mathews, an Episcopal priest in Washington State, puts it this way: “That’s why I love Advent … Jesus never *doesn’t* get born. We long, hope, wait, anticipate, and we are never let down at the last minute.” Every year, Christmas always arrives. Even if we are exhausted or brokenhearted, the Light of Christ always comes to the Church. Always. The final candle is always lit.

Advent and Christmas are here every year to remind us that God has already broken through. Despite the world’s pain, the dawn is well on the way.

And that is why Mary finds Elizabeth and sings her heart out. So, let us today find one another and sing our hearts out to the God who breaks through, who sustains our lives, and who dares us to hope big — and beckons us to sing loud. Amen.

The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior’s Lutheran Church (ELCA) in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born in rural Alabama, considers Atlanta home, and lives in and adores New England. She has worked in a variety of ministry settings, urban and rural, both in the parish and in hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, Anna enjoys climbing the nearby mountains, traveling, exploring cities and nightlife, and keeping up with politics.
Christmas Day (I)

COLLECT
O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS
ISAIAH 9:2-7; PSALM 96; TITUS 2:11-14; LUKE 2:1-14 (15-20)

CHRISTMAS IS A CHOICE
by the Rev. Whitney Rice

Christmas is not an event. Christmas is not a holiday. Christmas is not a church service.

Christmas is not a set of familiar carols or decorations of red and green or a jolly man in a red suit with eight tiny reindeer. Christmas is not an occasion or a party or a festival. It is not a piece of history or time off work or a gathering with family.

All of these things are connected to Christmas, but fundamentally, Christmas is not an event.

Christmas is a choice.

Mary didn’t have a choice about being on the road when she went into labor. Joseph had to register for the census and that meant traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Joseph didn’t have a choice about the fact that this child was not biologically his own. It was a done deal by the time he found out about it. Neither of them had a choice about the fact that Jesus would be born in a stable. There was no room at the inn, so it was either the barn or a ditch by the side of the road.

They were made vulnerable by their circumstances: vulnerable to gossip about Jesus’ parentage, vulnerable to physical pain and danger in Mary’s case, vulnerable to a feeling of failing to provide for his family in Joseph’s case.

The shepherds didn’t have a choice about being out in the fields with their sheep in the dark and the cold. The sheep needed tending and guarding, and the sheep were the shepherds’ livelihood, their means of economic survival. The shepherds were vulnerable to the weather and the terrain. They also didn’t have a choice about the visiting angels. The heavenly host descended on them out of nowhere, and suddenly Glorias were filling the air. They were terrified, and had no defense against their fear.

As you think about your life this year, where do you feel like you didn’t have a choice? It’s likely that many things come to mind. You don’t have a choice about the Alzheimer’s or dementia that has taken over not just the life of your spouse or parent, but your life as well. You don’t have a choice about the heart attack or cancer that took away a loved one all too soon. You don’t have a choice about the job you hate or the job you lost or the job you can’t get. You don’t have a choice about your own struggles with food or relationships or sleep or alcohol, the fight to make good choices that you seem to lose over and over.

And so, we come to Christmas. And Christmas is all about God giving us a choice.

God places the power in our hands. God comes into the raging inferno of our insane world and says to us, “Do you want me? Will you allow me to be born among you? Will you accept this tiny infant as your savior and your friend and your hope?”

And we’re free to say no. Because underneath that choice is another choice, and that is the true choice of Christmas.

We have to choose to be vulnerable to joy. Vulnerable to joy? That doesn’t seem to be much of a choice. Who doesn’t want to experience joy?

Well, it’s more complicated than that. Despair and cynicism and even hatred are actually the paths of least resistance. When something
offends us or frightens us, the easiest response is to lash out in anger and vicious self-defense. And with the difficult situations in our lives compounded by the conflicts in our society, our walls are very, very high right now. We will not be caught defenseless. We will not be left unaware. We will not be caught off guard, made to look foolish, victims of a surprise attack. Our fear almost makes us seek out darkness everywhere we go, if only to justify the walls we’ve built around our hearts.

And how does God answer our minds and hearts and communities bristling with self-defense so aggressive that it actually seems to be offense?

God gives Godself to us in the most vulnerable form possible: a fragile human baby.

And how could we respond with anything but joy?

Joy is surprisingly difficult to let ourselves feel fully. We hedge our joy. We celebrate and give thanks, but in the back of our minds, there is the knowledge that this goodness could be lost in a moment, that it will probably all turn bad in the future, that even this light does not erase the darkness in our lives. We hedge our joy, unwilling to let go those last shreds of defended self-consciousness, the final walls that protect us from being utterly vulnerable, able to be hurt.

That is why true joy requires vulnerability. We have to set down our weapons, take off our armor, lay aside our power and control, in order to even see the infant Christ in each other, much less kneel and adore him. It is a terrifying prospect.

But the choice of Christmas that we make is in answer to the choice that God made, the choice to come to us fragile, undefended, vulnerable, utterly reliant on us humans for his survival in the world. And God took joy in giving Godself to us in this way. So if we can take the same risk that God did, we can feel the same joy God feels. Light meets light, joy touches joy, and the darkness itself bows in awe at the radiance that shines out of the fragile infant Christ.

And what happens when we do take off the armor? What happens when we stop trying to be right all the time, safe all the time, in control all the time? What happens when we let the light radiating from that small face in the manger penetrate our hearts?

Oh, it is so beautiful. You may laugh. You may cry. You may laugh through your tears and cry in your laughter. Joy is deeper than happiness or celebration or giddy exuberance. Joy is a force that knocks down all the walls around our hearts and levels us with the goodness, the grace, the unearned and unending love and healing that is our newly arrived Jesus.

Joy remakes us, tears down our cynical and fearful identities and gives birth to a self that is trusting, patient, believing, knowing that all will be well and all manner of things will be well. Joy is the reward of the long nurtured faith that got us here. Joy is a quiet and lasting foundation that endures while the currents of happiness and grief wash back and forth over the surface of our hearts.

Joy is the first breath the resurrected Christ takes in the tomb on Easter morning. It is the breath behind the healing words he speaks to you when you clutch at the hem of his robe. It is the quiet, sweet breaths of the sleeping baby in the manger as we look on, feeling our hearts overflow. The joy of Christ becomes our own breath, and if we surrender this far to grace, we could no more choose not to live in him than we could choose not to breathe.

That is what awaits us behind the choice of Christmas. That is what being vulnerable to joy feels like. That is what joy can do to us if we let it—if we have the courage to let go into the miracle.

It’s all up to us. What choice will you make?

The Rev. Whitney Rice is an Episcopal priest, recently named an Evangelism Catalyst for the Diocese of Indianapolis, who currently serves at St. Francis In-The-Fields Episcopal Church in Zionsville, Indiana. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has contributed to Lectionary Homiletics, the Young Clergy Women’s Project journal Fidelia’s
Sisters, and other publications. She is a researcher and community ministry
grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, and a
founding partner in the newly-forming women’s spirituality collective The Hive
(www.thehiveapiary.com). Find more of her work at her website Roof Crashers
& Hem Grabbers (www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).

Christmas Day (II)

COLLECT
Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our
nature upon him, and to be born this day of a pure virgin: Grant that
we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption
and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord
Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory,
now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS
ISAIAH 62:6-12; PSALM 97; TITUS 3:4-7; LUKE 2:(1-7) 8-20

O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL, BORED AND IRRITATED
by the Rev. Whitney Rice

Why are we here today?

That’s actually a more complex question than we might think. Many of
us are here out of habit and/or tradition. We’re here either because
we come to this church every Sunday and Christmas Day is part of
the deal, or we’re here because we simply always go to church on
Christmas and Easter.

We might be here because our parents made us come, or we might be
here for the sake of the children or grandchildren. We might be here
to sing favorite carols and see the greenery and just generally feel
festive. Every one of those reasons is a fine and good reason to be in
church today.

But there might just be another reason working in the background,
whether we realize it or not.

Think about the people who were at the first Christmas. Mary was
there because she literally had no other choice. Biology took over
at that point and she was obviously present at the birth of her child. Joseph was there because he loved his fiancée and wanted to do right by her and take care of her. The sheep and camels were there because their stable had been invaded by this couple who could find no room at the inn. And the shepherds were there probably out of curiosity, to find out if their vision of the angelic host was real or just a result of being oxygen deprived in the thin air way up on the hillsides with their sheep.

And the fact that they were in Bethlehem was not on purpose either. Mary and Joseph would probably have wanted to have the baby at home in Nazareth where they had friends and family to help them. They were only in Bethlehem because they had to go there for the census ordered by the emperor. Perhaps it was an equally strange mix of seemingly meaningless circumstances that brought you here today.

The old Christmas hymn, *Adeste Fideles*, calls all of us to this moment. “O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant.” We hope to feel joyful and triumphant on Christmas. Mary likely felt joyful and triumphant after just going through labor with no family or friends to help her and successfully delivering a healthy baby boy.

But it’s okay if you’re not feeling joyful and triumphant. O come, all ye faithful, bored and irritated. O come, all ye faithful, exhausted and worried. O come, all ye faithful, cynical and angry. O come, all ye faithful, heartbroken and grieving.

Simply come, all ye faithful, no matter what you’re feeling.

No doubt Joseph and the shepherds had mixed feelings as they entered the stable. But once they gazed on the face of the Christ Child, the Baby Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, everything changed. Whatever reason had brought them to this moment no longer mattered, and all of their complex, self-directed emotions faded to simple awe. When they saw him, their hearts cried out to do only one thing: fall to their knees and adore him.

What does it mean to adore someone?

It’s a term that we use lightly all the time to express admiration and love for someone: “Oh, I just adore her, she’s wonderful.”

The term “adore” is actually used very sparingly in the Bible. There are a variety of words used in relationship to worship: praise, glorify, rejoice. But adoration only happens in circumstances when people feel their smallness and imperfection in the face of the greatness and perfection of God. But rather than the people feeling bad about how small and imperfect they are, they are instead completely taken outside of themselves and enraptured and lost in the love and wonder of God.

Most of us probably do an okay amount of praising God, and we sure do a whole lot of petitioning God, asking God to fulfill our wishes and plans. But how often do we adore God? How often do we let go of our own agendas completely because we can’t help it, because we are so overwhelmed by the goodness and love of God streaming over and through us? Maybe not often enough.

There’s something in us that resists adoration. With praise and petition and even rejoicing and glorifying, we’re still in control. We’re generating action toward God based on our evaluation of God’s goodness and what we want to get out of it.

But to adore God is something else. Adoration means we are brought to our knees by the grace we’re experiencing, and it’s no longer about us. For once, we have forgotten our needs and our wants, and simply bask in how very good God is.

But if we find it hard to adore God in God’s majesty and greatness, it seems even less likely that we will want to go to our knees in a dusty, dirty stable for a newborn baby in a manger. There’s nothing awe-inspiring about a helpless baby. What has a baby done to impress me? What can a baby do to answer my prayers?

But even as we’re thinking these thoughts, we suddenly do stumble to our knees. God could have come to earth in any giant, majestic, theatrical way God wanted to. God could have shown up with lights painted across the sky and trumpets and fireworks and earthquakes. But God came as a child. God sent God’s beloved and only son as the most vulnerable and fragile creature imaginable: a human baby.

And that is what strikes us dumb and finally, finally takes our focus
off ourselves and our needs. The raw power and depth of love that God must have for us to send Jesus to us this way when something terrible could so easily have happened is humbling. Think about how astronomically high the rate of infant mortality was in those days. Cold, exposure, infection, injury—a thousand things could have gone wrong in the first hours, not to mention the days and weeks and months to come, days and weeks and months in which Jesus had nothing to protect him, no modern medicine, no safe shelter, nothing but love.

The courage of that love, to come to earth as a fragile human baby and risk it all for us in this obscure and humble place—suddenly there is nothing we want to do more than go to our knees at the manger and adore him. The fragile courage of this small child awakens a similar fragile courage within us, to kneel down and open ourselves completely to this love, to let go, to adore.

Jesus had no protection from the many dangers that could harm him as a human baby, and he has no protection from the coldness of our cynicism and indifference. But the love and promise that he radiates emit a light brighter than the star shining overhead, a light that can melt the cold shield of ice we have wrapped around our hearts to protect ourselves from the intensity of pain and joy that comes with loving.

So we the faithful have come as we were called. Joyful and triumphant, bored and irritated, cynical and angry, exhausted and worried, or grieving and heartbroken, we have come.

Maybe we expected to drift off into daydreams during church, or ask God for something special in our stockings, or simply relax and have a good time with friends and family, and all of those things are fine to do.

Maybe we came here worrying that we would have to hide the fact that we are afraid that we are the only ones that sometimes can neither see nor feel the magic of Christmas.

But as we approach the manger and see that God has had the courage to risk it all for us, out of the sheer depth and passion of God’s love for us, let us answer that courage with a courage of our own. Let us answer with the courage to let go of our agendas and our needs, kneeling at the manger and gazing into the face of love, fragile in form but stronger than steel in intent.

O come, all ye faithful. O come, let us adore him.

The Rev. Whitney Rice is an Episcopal priest, recently named an Evangelism Catalyst for the Diocese of Indianapolis, who currently serves at St. Francis In-The-Fields Episcopal Church in Zionsville, Indiana. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has contributed to Lectionary Homiletics, the Young Clergy Women’s Project journal Fidelia’s Sisters, and other publications. She is a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, and a founding partner in the newly-forming women’s spirituality collective The Hive (www.thehiveapiary.com). Find more of her work at her website Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers (www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).
Christmas Day (III)

COLLECT
O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

READINGS
ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-4, (5-12); JOHN 1:1-14

BEYOND WORDS
by the Rev. Canon Frank Logue

Words fail.

Stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Feel the wind rising off the canyon walls. See the light dappling in the crevices of the great chasm. Then try to describe this in words. For those who have stood there for themselves, your experience will bring back their own. But tell of feelings felt so deeply on the edge of the Grand Canyon to someone who has never been outside the confines of the cornfields of Iowa and words alone will fall flat.

A mother holds her newborn baby, seeing for the first time the child that has been growing in her womb. Those perfect hands touch her own. She counts and recounts the ten tiny toes—flesh of her flesh. We only have the power to evoke the faintest shadow of the vast ocean of emotions felt by the Virgin Mary as she held Jesus. Yes, words are powerful and can be life-changing, but some moments in life are beyond the power of language to contain.

One can craft tasty sentences that amuse, arouse, or anger. Yet language falls short of the breadth of human experience. Wittgenstein studied language deeply as an important philosopher of the last century and he found that words are not up to a task so simple as describing the aroma of a cup of coffee. He noted that if we can’t describe a cup of coffee, how much more difficult is it to portray God with words.

Yet portraying God with words is the task of scripture. Inspired by God, the Bible’s authors gave us moving passages of great depth of meaning, knowing that God is still beyond words. With soaring language, John’s Gospel begins with a poetic passage placing Jesus in eternal context:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

On this Christmas Day, John takes us back to the beginning: the “In the beginning” of the Book of Genesis. He reminds us that the story of Jesus started before the world began, when the spirit of God hovered over the waters in creation as chaos swirled into order. There before the story of humanity was Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word of God creating the world.

John uses poetry to point to the triune God beyond all language. In doing so, John uses words laden with meaning. He calls Jesus the “Logos,” a word from Greek philosophy, which meant much more than the basic unit of a sentence. Logos is the idea or concept behind the words of language. The Logos is the eternal pattern, the perfect ideal the word tries to express. So, the word “square” means a shape equal on all sides. Even if we can never draw a perfect square, the word square still refers to that perfection. Jesus is that perfect Word, that Logos.

John also tells us that this perfect Word dwelled among us using a word that literally means “pitched a tent in our midst.” For Jews, this would
naturally bring to mind the idea of the tent where God’s glory dwelt with Israel during the Exodus from Egypt. This was the same glory of God that dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. The poetic words, “God pitched his tent among us,” say that in the same way that the very glory of God present to the Hebrews in the Exodus and the Jews of the first century in the Temple is present in Jesus. In dwelling among us, however, Jesus is out among the people, rather than contained within the Temple.

In this poetic way, John pointed to so much more than he said. For the Temple was the nexus—the meeting place—of God and humanity on earth. Jesus becomes that place of connection between God and humanity. In Jesus, the glory of God became visible on earth.

This prologue then sets us up for all that follows. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well and he accepts her, showing her the loving care others did not, we see the heart of God lived out on earth. Again and again, in John’s Gospel, we see signs that point to Jesus being God among us. In his life, as well as in his teaching, Jesus reveals more about God than we could learn otherwise.

I could go on showing these connections, but John’s Gospel does it so well in two verses. In verse 18, which is just beyond our reading for today, John writes, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” Then at the end of chapter 20, John writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

While all the words in the world could not contain the Word made human in Jesus, the words John chose are written so that we might believe and have life. John knew God’s own glory had pitched his tent among us in a stable in Bethlehem. Then God gave the Holy Spirit as a first gift to those who come to believe. The Jesus who was the Word made flesh would always be present with those who heard John’s Gospel. This is why Christians have always emphasized reading scripture, as the words convey God’s own heart.

In sharing *The Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus Centered Life*, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has offered this church patterns which have nourished Christians for centuries. Captured in the words Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest, are practices proven to move one over time toward a life more like Jesus. Learn is reflecting on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus’ life and teachings. There are many ways to live into this practice and each makes the eternal Word Jesus more present through the words of the Bible.

The same Holy Spirit who inspired John’s Gospel inspires you as you read and reflect on scripture. It is that inspiration for the reader as well as the author that makes the Bible more than words on a page.

The God whose presence dwelt in fullness in Jesus of Nazareth is also fully present in your heart and here in our worship in both Word and Sacrament. Jesus was present in our readings and as we come forward to receive the Eucharist, our triune God present in creation is here with you.

If you have never stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, my words would fail to convey that experience. You may never be that mother first laying eyes on the child that has been forming inside her, so my words could fail to explain the depth of feeling. Words fail to convey the presence of God in your life, but God’s presence is every bit as real, and even more vital, than all those experiences in your life that are beyond words.

While words can and will fail, Jesus, the eternal Word of God, never fails. Amen.

*The Rev. Canon Frank Logue* is Canon to the Ordinary of the Diocese of Georgia and a member of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church. Frank blogs on church development topics at loosecanon.georgiaepiscopal.org.